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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [SOCI](#) [SY](#) [TU](#)
SUBJECT: MICHEL KILO: FREED DISSIDENT ANALYZES US-SYRIAN
FUTURE

REF: A. 07 DAMASCUS 00309
[1](#)B. 08 DAMASCUS 00842
[1](#)C. DAMASCUS 00534
[1](#)D. DAMASCUS 00735

Classified By: CDA Charles Hunter for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Poloffs met with the prominent dissident Michel Kilo at his home on October 21 for a wide-ranging discussion on the state of Syria's political opposition and its view of U.S.-Syrian rapprochement. Kilo, who was released from prison in May of this year, generally supported U.S. engagement with the SARG on a number of fronts and outlined recommendations on how best to leverage the thawing relationship into long-term strategic gains for the U.S., the Syrian opposition, and the region writ large. Kilo told us he had advised "the Europeans" similarly, and hoped their approach vis-a-vis the now-troubled Association Agreement might achieve political and human rights gains for the Syrian people. In an astute analysis of President Bashar al-Asad's current power base, Kilo suggested any engagement setting forth explicit demands for behavior change would require up-front guarantees that the U.S. would support the current regime and would not align itself with either internal or external threats to its legitimacy. End summary.

Background

[1](#)2. (C) Michel Kilo was sentenced to three years in prison on May 13, 2007, for being signatory to the 2006 Beirut-Damascus Declaration. This declaration had, among other things, called for a normalization of relations between Syria and Lebanon, the return of an ambassador, and a recognition of Lebanon's sovereignty. On May 19, 2009, after serving his full sentence, Kilo was released -- ironically, just as the SARG was fulfilling many of the demands the Beirut-Damascus Declaration had championed.

[1](#)3. (C) Perhaps more important than signing the Beirut-Damascus Declaration was Kilo's early work as one of the key architects of the Damascus Declaration, signed in [1](#)2005. Kilo not only helped draft the document, but also secretly negotiated with the Muslim Brotherhood to gain their support and formal imprimatur.

U.S. Prospects in Syria

14. (C) The overarching message Kilo delivered to us was "Syria believes its fate will be determined by the U.S." Relations with the Europeans, Iran, and Turkey, while clearly valuable in their own right, were ultimately cards to be played as the game of rapprochement with the U.S. progressed, he said. The recent turn toward Turkey, Kilo added, was a deliberate move to gain a stronger position in talking to the U.S. Given this attitude, the U.S. should forge ahead in the negotiating process, but do so by proffering a set of guarantees and deliverables that would ensure the regime of its continued legitimacy, coupled with clear demands on behavior change.

15. (C) Kilo warned, though, that the U.S. would have to "force the peace," and this would include coercing the Syrians into actually accepting a return of the Golan. Echoing opinions we have heard from other political opposition figures over the years (ref A), Kilo maintained the lack of a peace treaty with the Israelis and continued occupation of the Golan justified persistent use of the Emergency Law. Over the last 42 years, the law had evolved into the primary tool for preserving the Asad family's preeminence atop an Alawi stranglehold on vital political and economic positions in the public and private sectors. Hence, without being forced to the table, it was unlikely the SARG could actively pursue a peace process that would pull the rug out from under its seat of power.

Strategic Security Guarantees

16. (C) "When (Secretary Colin) Powell came in 2004, he made demands, but had no guarantees to trade," Kilo asserted. Speculating on Powell's discussions with SARG officials, Kilo argued the SARG had wanted U.S. assurances that nothing would be done to undermine or topple the government. Powell, Kilo said, could not deliver any promise of security and, as a result, he left the SARG with the impression Syria could be the next target after Iraq.

17. (C) "Tell the regime, 'we don't want to change you, but we cannot accept the status quo; if you want peace, you cannot have relationships with Hamas and Hizbollah. Make alliances with the forces of peace, and we will facilitate the process,'" Kilo passionately advised us. He cautioned, however, against overt assistance to the internal, democratic opposition. He argued the SARG perceived democratic reform as a greater threat than Islamist extremism. The SARG felt confident western nations (including the U.S.) would support, or at least quietly tolerate, its actions against "Islamists," but feared the West would abandon the SARG in favor of grassroots democratic organizations publicly pushing for a seat at the table if the opportunity presented itself. "Once it accepts peace, there will be thousands of ways (for the opposition) to attack the regime," Kilo intoned.

18. (C) The tenor of discussion with the SARG should reflect a desire for "partnership," Kilo elaborated. Through a discourse predicated on partnership, the West could argue more convincingly against human rights abuses without inviting the accusation of interfering in Syria's internal affairs. To do this, Kilo declared, required western nations to enunciate precisely how a partnership framework would include specific expectations about human rights, and that this would be integral to a bilateral relationship.

Sanctions

19. (C) Responding to a question on the effectiveness of the

sanctions regime, Kilo postulated that sanctions were only ever effective when they were temporary and used to force a dialogue. He characterized current U.S. sanction policy as having paralyzed a few sectors of the economy, but having lasted too long to bring about real behavioral change. "I advised the Europeans to open up and make economic bridges that, in the future, could be converted into political influence, which in turn might have an impact on human rights," Kilo noted. Thirty years of sanctions, he added, had only numbed the population both to their impact and the original reasons they were imposed. "Sanctions should raise issues, not suppress them," he mused.

Asad's Authority has Narrowed

¶10. (C) Bashar has not consolidated control in the way his father did, Kilo observed. Having never played a contributing role in his father's regime, the son's legitimacy in the eyes of SARG political power brokers was tenuous at best. In fact, Kilo asserted, "if the U.S. had talked to the right people soon after Hafez's death and said you didn't want this man (Bashar), the Asad regime would have disappeared within five years." Kilo did not hazard to say what might have replaced it, but he did remark that were Bashar to die, nobody would again be able to hold the main regime elements together and keep the country unified.

¶11. (C) Kilo said unlike Hafez, Bashar al-Asad had failed to win mastery over all four of the regime's main pillars of power: the Alawi, the army, the security branches, and National Progressive Front as led by the Ba'ath Party. He

noted that the balance between them had been irremediably disrupted. The President's role was confined to foreign policy while security ran everything else, and this explained why, during negotiations with foreign interlocutors, the Palace sometimes looked out of sync with events on the ground, Kilo said.

Damascus Declaration

¶12. (C) Asked to speculate about the future of the Damascus Declaration movement, Kilo confirmed analyses we had heard from other senior dissidents (ref B); namely, it had all but ceased to have a meaningful existence. The Declaration was conceived as a movement into which diverse parties would contribute energies to unify the opposition. What happened instead, he mourned, was that each party wanted ownership over the language and direction. The movement was supposed to provide a common ground for the opposition to move beyond fractured party politics, but individual parties brought their fractiousness into the movement. "Instead of becoming stronger, the opposition became weaker because of the Declaration. Now, the Damascus Declaration will need a lot of work to achieve its original goals."

¶13. (C) Kilo believed the recent arrests of Muhanad al-Hasani and Haitham Maleh (refs C & D) did not bode well for civil society activists in the country. He argued the SARG wanted its voice to be the only audible sound coming from the country. In seeking dialogue with the U.S., the SARG would work increasingly hard to exclude any voice that it perceived might weaken its hand. For this reason, he added, the U.S. must set forth its expectations on civil society and human rights at the outset of discussions.

¶14. (C) Comment: Prior to his imprisonment, Michel Kilo was one of Post's most thoughtful and insightful contacts. After three years of "losing weight and eating healthily in jail," Kilo appears to be picking up where he left off. Kilo's observations on the future of U.S.-Syrian engagement draw together similar strands of thought we have heard from civil society activists in the past. It is encouraging that the political opposition does not, for the most part, view

rapprochement and human rights as an either/or situation. We note recent high-level U.S. delegations have adopted this approach during visits, including A/S Jeffrey Feltman and Senator John Kerry, where the language of cooperation on areas of mutual interest was placed alongside references to human rights issues. In the short run, this method will predictably irritate the SARG. However, SARG's fervent hope to rebrand itself as the region's "indispensable" (instead of the "unavoidable") player and emerge from isolation through an EU Association Agreement and the WTO may render Asad and company more open to long-term strategic planning that would permit more frank discussions on civil society matters.

¶15. (C) Comment continued: The question of whether Asad's power is as circumscribed as Kilo suggested remains a topic of debate in Damascus. The awkward convergence of FM Muallim's public statements on the EU Association Agreement with the high-profile arrest of Haitham Maleh (ref D) suggests a lack of coordination between the Palace and the security services. Asad has, however, survived his uncertain beginnings intact and solidified control over the most essential regime elements. Whether that consolidating process has reached the end of its half-life will become clearer as Asad is forced to the table of political and economic reform in order to achieve the much-desired, new international status. End Comment.
HUNTER